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Future School Finance Act

Senate Bill 13-213

Wade Buchanan, President, the Bell Policy Center
Testimony to the House Education Committee
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My name is Wade Buchanan, and I am the president of the Bell Policy Center. The Bell is a non-partisan, non-profit research and policy organization founded on progressive values.

The Bell Policy Center strongly supports Senate Bill 13-213, the proposal to update Colorado's school financing formula for the first time in almost 20 years.

From its beginning, the Bell's guiding principle has been to expand opportunity for all. In terms of education, that means creating a system that prepares all students to succeed, whether in college or in the workplace. We believe SB 13-213, the Future School Finance Act, boldly moves us in that direction.

From our perspective, there are two crucial strengths at the core of this bill.

First, it **refocuses** our school finance system on the kinds of strategic investments we know will help all our children succeed. It significantly expands support for early childhood education, including quality preschool and full-day kindergarten, recognizing the importance of starting well in order to finish well – in school and in life. And it redesigns the finance formula to strengthen our support for a variety of student populations – most especially at-risk students and English language learners.

This is exactly what we need to do. Colorado's achievement gap between so-called "at-risk" students and their classmates is among the widest in the nation. Narrowing – and eventually eliminating – that gap is essential if we are to expand opportunity for all. Everyone in Colorado will benefit if we take the right steps to give every student the opportunity to learn, to grow and ultimately to give back to the community.

Second, the bill recognizes additional **resources** are vital for our schools to accomplish the important goals and outcomes we have set over the last several years. We have long said that a key problem is our lack of funding for public systems relative to our aspirations for Colorado.

The General Assembly has passed other important education reforms in the past several years. But as the Lobato decision suggests, we cannot pretend it is enough to continue to pass reforms without considering what it costs to implement them effectively. That is not a model for success, either in business or in the critical job of preparing our kids for the future. Our Constitution may not allow you, as elected officials, to take the steps to raise additional revenues. But that does not mean they are not essential to true reform.

So if we are serious about the reforms in SB 13-213, then its explicit tie to increased funding through a ballot measure approved by the people is absolutely crucial.

We strongly support SB 13-213 in its current form. But we also recognize the issue is very complex. Many of you are asking good questions and making good suggestions, and we remain open-minded about ways to improve the bill or expand support for reform.

However, we ask that you not lose sight of this bill's simple and essential goal – to modernize our school funding system to make it better serve every student. Please do not let the perfect be the enemy of the very good. Please take a statewide view of what we are trying to do. And please remember that it is about the students – all the students. Their success is what really matters. It's really the only thing that matters. When they succeed, we all succeed, and our state, our economy and our future are stronger.

Thank you for the opportunity to share our thoughts with you. We agree with those who have called this a once-in-a-generation opportunity, and we urge you to support Senate Bill 13-213. I thank Rep. Hamner for bringing it to you today. If you have any questions, or if I can provide further information, please call me at 303.297.0456, ext. 221, or email me at buchanan@bellpolicy.org.